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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000164

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: BDP CONVENTION SHOWS NEW PARTY, SAME FACE FOR KURDS

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Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady for reasons 1.4(b,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The Peace and Democracy Party (BDP), which took over the reins from the now-banned Democratic Society Party (DTP) in December, held its first party convention on February 1 in Ankara. Although PKK demonstrators were fewer than at the DTP convention in October 2008, it was clear that the BDP will become an extension of the DTP, following most of the same policies and practices, and aligning themselves closely with the PKK terrorist group. Demir Celik, former chairman of BDP, opened the convention with an uncharacteristically strong speech condemning attempts to eliminate the Kurds and the PKK. The two newly elected co-chairs, Selahattin Demirtas and Gultan Kisanak, addressed the convention with similarly strong speeches against the ruling Justice and Democracy Party (AKP) and in support of jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan. END SUMMARY.

Party Convention Highlights

12. (C) Around 2,500 supporters attended the Peace and Democracy Party's first party convention on February 1 in Ankara. Sevandir Bayindir, BDP MP from Sirnak, opened the convention with a ten minute speech entirely in Kurdish that garnered great applause from the audience. (Note: Speaking in Kurdish while making political speeches is against Turkey's Political Parties Law, and it is likely that charges will be pressed against Bayindir, although prosecution will be postponed due to her immunity as an active parliamentarian. End note.) After her speech in Kurdish, she switched to calling upon the government to prove its sincerity to solve the Kurdish issue by engaging with jailed PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan as an interlocutor. Among the attendees at the convention were banned DTP politicians Ahmet Turk and Aysel Tugluk and the October returnees from Makhmour and Kandil. Throughout the convention, the largest cheers and applause followed any mention of Ocalan's name or the struggle carried out by the PKK. After Bayindir spoke, a moment of silence was held for those who had been killed in "the struggle for freedom." The remainder of the convention was oddly subdued with applause whenever Ocalan was mentioned, and spatters of applause at other points. There was not the tone of excitement or change -- let alone the potential fisticuffs -- that were present at the October DTP convention.

¶3. (SBU) Demir Celik, BDP chairman since May 2008, opened the convention by accusing the AKP of attempting to eliminate the Kurds and their "organized power." He called for a democratic confederation of Kurds residing in four countries (Turkey, Syria, Iran, and Iraq) to work together to solve the Kurdish issue. He then stressed that the BDP was a party for all oppressed people in Turkey: Kurds, Alevis, Greek Orthodox, Roma, etc. Although Celik's speech was impassioned, it was obvious that he had been a figurehead for the party that was now run by the former DTP. During his speech, people milled around on the convention floor, talked openly among themselves, and welcomed new attendees with applause. When Ahmet Turk entered during Celik's speech, all the cameras ran to cover Turk's entrance and the crowd broke into a huge round of applause; Celik did not even pause his speech.

Co-Chair Speeches

¶4. (SBU) The speeches by the newly elected co-chairs Selahattin Demirtas and Gultan Kisanak strongly condemned the AKP government for its "anti-Kurd" policies. The AKP, they contended, was the state: there was no difference between it and the military, police, judiciary, or prosecutors. They pointedly blamed the AKP for ongoing operations against the KCK (the political wing of the PKK), following which 15 of their local mayors remain in prison. At one point, Kisanak

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claimed that more than 1,500 BDP members had been detained in the ongoing operations. The operations were designed to eliminate opposition to the AKP, and dissolve the "Kurdish democratic political struggle." Demirtas stressed that if the AKP was sincere and determined to solve the Kurdish issue, then the BDP was ready to work with it. However, as long as their cadre remained imprisoned, the BDP could never trust the AKP. Kisanak lamented that the PKK had called a unilateral ceasefire with the government, but the government had taken no steps to match it, instead stepping up their anti-PKK operations. She called on the AKP to end operations against the PKK and take a step toward peace.

¶5. (SBU) Uncharacteristic for the BDP, Kisanak also took a anti-U.S. stance in her speech. One of the biggest foreign policy mistakes made by the AKP, she claimed, was defending U.S. interests without question. She also said that the government, by accepting the support of foreign powers such as the U.S., was trying to oppress the democratic opposition of the Kurds. She called on the AKP to end its support for "capitalist imperialists" like the U.S.

¶6. (C) In a private dinner with the international diplomatic community on the evening of February 1, the new co-chairs struck a more neutral and moderate tone. Both they and other leaders of the party expressed their interest in obtaining the support of the US for their "struggle for democracy." There was no mention of Ocalan or the PKK, and although they were all hard on the AKP and what they see as a direct attack on their party members, there was much discussion of moving forward inclusively on the Kurdish issue.

Comment

¶7. (C) The BDP seems not only to be following in the footsteps of the DTP, but pushing further than before in insisting that Ocalan be taken as the interlocutor for a peaceful resolution to the Kurdish issue. It was clear that the BDP is already engaging in party politics in the run-up to the elections scheduled for summer 2011. Their clear and strong anti-AKP rhetoric coupled with a strengthened sense of Kurdish nationalism seemed targeted at those supporters of

the former DTP who might be leaning toward supporting the AKP. Moreover, their spoken outreach to other communities in Turkey like the Alevis, Greek Orthodox, Laz, Roma, youth, and women, shows their desire to become a party that can be competitive in the entire country, not just in the Southeast.

(Note: The press reported that some of the songs played during the BDP convention were sung in Laz. End note.) As long as the BDP can continue to function as a party without being closed before the elections, it could potentially ride the wave of dissatisfaction with the government's National Unity Project over the electoral threshold of ten percent. However, the party will have to survive for another 15 or 16 months to accomplish that goal. The party's continued closeness with the PKK and insistence on focusing on Ocalan's role in any movement forward on the Kurdish issue will land them in trouble. The Ankara Chief Public Prosecutor has already opened an investigation into the convention alleging acts in praise of crime and criminals, to alienate the public from fulfilling military duties, and in violation of the political parties law.

18. (C) Comment (cont.): The BDP's harsh rhetoric also does not bode well for the AKP and its democratization agenda. That the BDP is unrepentant in its focus on Abdullah Ocalan and the PKK strengthens opposition parties' claims that the AKP is dividing, rather than unifying, the nation. The BDP's rhetoric is souring the opinions of Kurds in the Southeast against the AKP, and their disenchantment may spread to communities of migrant Kurds in the suburbs of cities such as Mersin, Izmir, and Antalya, where nationalism is running high. With the AKP standing alone, its reform agenda -- now likely to take the form of constitutional amendments -- is in danger of stalling.
Jeffrey

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